

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

www.azcapitoltimes.com

September 12, 2008 Vol. 109 Issue 37

ARTS

ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

FOCUS

SECTION A • SEPTEMBER 12, 2008

Granting artist wishes

Commission's grants inspire
artists to complete projects.

Page 2

Colorful district

Roosevelt Row is an example
of the city and art community
working together.

Page 6

Impressions Big and Small • Mayme Kratz,
working on a resin sculpture, says her 2002 grant enabled
her to complete an art project based on her impressions
of objects seen through microscopes and telescopes.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



PHOTO BY BILL COATES

The Process of Art • Sue Chenoweth, a 2006 winner, says her art is a process that combines research, art history and emotion.

State grants pave way for artists

By Bill Coates

bill.coates@azcapitoltimes.com

For Sue Chenoweth, art is a process. The research that goes into her paintings and drawings, as well as her emotional involvement, is as much a part of the art as the finished product.

“It’s like a conversation you’re having with the painting. That’s the process,” Chenoweth says.

As she speaks, she’s sitting in her studio — a spare room in her house with windows overlooking her back yard. It’s well lit. Artist wood panels and drawing paper hang from the walls. Paints are plenty. Brushes, papers and other supplies crowd each other for space.

For one project, the process took her to Gilded Age Mansions in Newport, R.I. She tied into what she learned on the tours from her own childhood memories of her home in Phoenix, as well as her friend’s across the street. These were memories of two families, she says.

That was the process. It gave way to the creation of a room-size game on paper — dots connecting relatives and objects through houses and rooms.

But supplies and research are expensive. So moving ahead on the project led Chenoweth to apply for an artist project grant with

‘It was really a macro-micro exchange.’

— Artist and grant recipient Mayme Kratz, describing research for her art project

the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

The commission, a state agency, awards the grants every year. They’re not just for painting. The grants cover everything from visual arts to fiction, poetry, playwriting and dance.

The idea is to give an artist a career boost. And on the larger scale, to enrich the community, says Robert Booker, executive director of the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

“We know the value of arts in the community,” Booker says.

For the artists, the value in dollars and cents is \$5,000 for an individual project. It’s a figure that lies somewhere between a pitance and a windfall. It was enough to let Chenoweth, 55, an art teacher at the Metropolitan Art Institute — a charter high school — to follow through on her project.

The money from the 2006 grant helped fund the trip to Newport.

“I went to the Gilded Age Mansions. I also went on special tours where I went down behind the scenes on these houses.”

Then came the supplies.



PHOTO BY BILL COATES

Artistic Boost • Casey Blake and Robert Booker of the Arizona Commission on the Arts say the art-project grants can be a turning point for artists.

“I started by ordering a huge 10-foot tall roll of paper. We have to work on archival paper, and it’s expensive,” said Chenoweth.

The work also involved special graphic-design paper — a type used before the advent of computers. Chenoweth went on to finish the work, as required by the grant. It became part of a fall 2006 exhibit at Arizona State University Art Museum, titled *The New American City: Artists Look Forward*.

It also led something of a journey of discovery. As Chenoweth painted, her emotions came to the surface. Chenoweth broke down and cried. The work evoked memories of a childhood friend, and both their families.

Those memories became part of Chenoweth’s game board, a depiction of “pathways and relationships.”

To the eye, the work appears as a collection of figures, buildings and forms. Chenoweth describes it as a narrative melting into the abstract.

Artists’ unknown paths

As an artist, Mayme Kratz has much in common with Chenoweth, but also much that differs. She does not work out of her home, but in a warehouse-size studio tucked away on an

industrial back street near downtown Phoenix. Her work is something of a process as well, though a much different one.

She hikes in the desert and incorporates what she collects into her art.

Like Chenoweth, though, she’s not always sure where the path of discovery will lead.

“I don’t always know what the results are going to be,” she says.

Like Chenoweth, Kratz was also a commission grant recipient — in 2002. And like Chenoweth, Kratz had the good fortune — and the talent — to win the award over a crowded field of applicants.

The project grants don’t go to everyone who applies. They’re competitive, to say the least. Last year, the commission received some 125 applicants. Seventeen grants were awarded. Each artist gets one per lifetime.

The grants go to artists who can show a body of previous work. The grant project must be completed within a year’s time. And the money must be accounted for.

“We get a final report, and we often do site visits,” Booker says.



Words Matter • Sean Nevin won a 2007 grant to complete a book of poems about one man's struggle with Alzheimer's, due to be published later this year.

The artist projects, Booker adds, make up only a part of the commission's work. The commission promotes the arts in Arizona a number of ways, he says. Foremost, it supports, through grants and assistance, arts organizations throughout the state. In addition, the commission oversees workshops and funds arts-education programs.

Overall, the artist project grants make up a small portion of agency's funding. But Booker says they still play a big role.

"Artists are the gas that runs the machine, so you have to have a healthy artist community," he said.

The project grants program, he adds, draws applicants from throughout the state.

An independent panel judges the entries and makes the final selection. The panelists represent different disciplines in art and are all from out of state. Last year's panel included a performing arts program director from Portland, Ore., an artist and high school teacher from El Paso, Texas, a fiction writer and English professor from Utah and an artistic director from Minneapolis.

Last year's winners ranged from poets and photographers to a sculptor who proposed building a 17-foot-long automobile from license plates.

Setbacks part of the game

For winners and losers alike, the judges explain their decisions. Fewer than 10 percent of applicants receive grants. But the also-rans should not be disheartened, Booker says. Everybody who works at the Arts Commission understands setbacks, as commission staffers have all been schooled or trained in the arts.

"We've been there," Booker says. "Rejection is part of our field."

It did not discourage Chenoweth, who failed to receive a grant on her first application.

The second time around, she approached her application the way she does her paintings — with an extraordinary amount of research.

"I went in and went and looked at the winning proposals, and the non-winning proposals," Chenoweth said.

Working from that, she decided to put more emphasis on what she goes through to create her art — the process.

For Kratz, 49, applying for a grant took a more intuitive route.

"I had a dream, and I knew," she says. "I just sat down and wrote it all out the next morning. I had a clarity about it."

Her proposal involved contrasting visions, interpreting art through the small and the celestial.

"I was going to get information from things I gathered and looked at under the microscope. And things from looking through the telescope," Kratz says.

Among the things she gathered were seed pods and animal-bone fragments from hiking the Superstitions. She placed them under the microscope. She was in for a surprise.

"I was realizing things I was observing in the seed pods and the bone fragments ended up kind of looking stellar," she said. She observed the celestial through the large telescope at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff. The large stellar objects looked like cells in the body.

"It was really a macro-micro exchange," she says.

The work included seeds cast in resin floating on a painted surface. The grant enabled her to complete her work without a big drawback common to artists — financial stress.

"It meant a lot," she says. "It meant I could buy a microscope without stressing about it. And I had some time where I could do some investigation. It was huge."

Booker says the grant's use depends on the art and the artist. For playwrights, it might mean staging a performance of their work in front of small audience.

"It's about having actors go through the script. It's about refining the work," he says.

This work, in turn, adds to the culture of the community — giving back to the community a new work of art, Booker says.

Beyond the money is the recognition that goes with the award, Booker says.

"To be recognized in the public forum by their peers is almost more valuable than money," Booker says.

Kratz would agree.

"It's the support of an idea and a belief and a vision, and those things are just as important as receiving the funds," she says.

An artist's turning point

For some, the grant is a career boost. For others, it's more like a slingshot.

"Many of our award recipients would report back to us that this was a turning point in their lives," says Casey Blake, individual artist services coordinator for the commission.

Sean Nevin says without the 2007 grant, he likely wouldn't have finished his poetry project — a book of poems about a man's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. It was something he had started some years back, just as some of his own family members fell victim to Alzheimer's and senile dementia. But Nevin, 38, set the work aside as he continued to teach creative writing. He's now director of the Young Writers Program at Arizona State University.

The grant, he says, "allowed me to take a summer and focus on my writing."

Part of that focus came from a three-week residency in Maine, where he completed most of the book, "Oblivio Gate."

The collection won the Crab Orchard award in poetry. It will also be published by the Southern Illinois University Press later this year.

"I think the commission has directly impacted my career and my life as an artist," Nevin says.

For Chenoweth and Kratz, the business of showing their work has taken different paths. Kratz shows with the

'For many of our award recipients, they would report back to us that this was a turning point in their lives.'

— Casey Blake, individual artist services coordinator for the Arizona Commission on the Arts

Scottsdale gallery, Lisa Sette, which specializes in contemporary artwork. Chenoweth shows with the Ghost Gallery, which offers an alternative to standard galleries at fixed locations.

"It uses buildings that developers have that are empty, that aren't developed yet," she says.

Chenoweth also has shown with the CUE Art Foundation in New York City, while Kratz has shown at the University of Arizona's Joseph Gross Gallery.

'The monster was me'

Buoyed by their success, they have moved onto other projects. For Chenoweth, the process continues to involve in-depth research, well before the paint hits the canvas or — in her case — the archival paper.

In her research, first-hand experience plays a big part. She recently had the idea to do a series on predator and prey. So along with research on the Internet — as well as works of fiction (think "Moby Dick") — she went scuba diving with sharks.

She did so off the Pacific island of Guadalupe, west of Baja. Cage diving gave her great white shark encounters up close and personal.

"I saw hundreds of sharks, 16 feet long," Chenoweth says.

The sharks appeared less threatening than the human

Project grant art

The following poem is from a book written Sean Nevin, a recipient of a project grant in 2007 from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. He credits the grant with helping him finish the book, a project he had started years earlier.

Alzheimer's

*A blizzard, late in the season, arrives
with its sudden cannonading...
It sends a lost soldier wandering, alone
toward the center of what he perceives
as a vast clearing in a dense pine grove.
Snowdrifts will billow up past his thighs,
and the chalk-blue terrain will forget
its own landmarks by nightfall. He will drop
his rifle and his rucksack on the snow,
hallucinate his dead mother
young again, then collapse. Then the moans,
the deep creak and clatter when the gray slab
of lake ice gives way. A braid of bottom grasses
will hold him down, a frost will heal the sky.*
— Sean Nevin

From "Oblivio Gate." Southern Illinois University Press, 2008

observers, she says.

“The monster was me,” she says.

The next step is putting all that information into a work of art. The role the sharks play — well, that’s all part of the process. She defines her work as something instinctively defined by her research and art history.

“Even though each brushstroke and drawn line is completely subconscious, there is a profound sense of orderly direction to my art,” Chenoweth wrote for the CUE Foundation exhibition.

Kratz continues to collect material on hikes — material that will become part of her art. And that includes roadkill. For her, it’s an affirmation of life.

“I was looking at the blood under the microscope,” she says.

The patterns and color suggested life, not death, to her.

“There’s beauty in everything,” Kratz says. “There’s a sadness that occurs with death, and I always like to collect things and give them another life.”

Often her paintings are accompanied by poems reflecting her feelings. They are part of the art.

“The work is always very personal to me,” Kratz says.

Soon, other rising artists will get a chance for a grant buying them the freedom to work on their ideas. Applications for 2009 are still being taken — but time is short. The deadline is Sept. 18. Requested materials and artistic work samples must be submitted through an online application at <http://apg.azarts.gov>.

In addition, a signature page — available online — must be mailed to the commission offices at 417 W. Roosevelt St., Phoenix, 85003, postmarked by the deadline.

The winners will likely be notified by February, Booker says. More than a dozen artists can then complete their journey of creativity — whether it’s in dance, poetry, painting, sculpture, fiction or the box marked “other.”

“We’re always happy to be part of that journey,” Booker says. 